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HB 460

Net Integrator

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From:

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Subject: FW: Article in Idaho Statesman - water treatment in perpetuity bill in Idaho

FYI

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Idaho Statesman
February 11, 2007

Andreason introduces bill to protect water from mining pollutants
Legislation would ban constructing new mines that require long-term
water treatment.

Atlanta Gold Corp. has struggled to treat arsenic-laced water leaking
from an old mine near Atlanta, where it hopes it may someday mine. It's
a problem across the American West. Old miners left after diverting
springs across acidic rock and ore, creating a stream of water filled
with heavy metals and other pollutants.

These polluted springs eventually end up in rivers like the Boise,
Salmon, Coeur d'Alene and other waterways of the West. The only way to
prevent the pollution is to treat the water as it leaves the old mine,
forever.

Now conservation groups and Sen. John Andreason, R-Boise, are pushing
bill to ban building new mines that require the same long-term water
treatment.

The powerful Idaho Mining Association already has said it will oppose a
complete ban.

But if the Legislature doesn't want to ban long-term water treatment,
Andreason has an alternative bill the would require companies to post a
bond to cover the costs if Idaho is left with a water problem like the
one earlier miners left near Atlanta.

"As a result, taxpayers are left to clean up the mess of others later,"
Andreason said. "It's far better to design facilities so they don't
require long-term treatment into perpetuity."
The Senate Resources and Environment Committee approved printing both
bills last week. A hearing will be scheduled later.

Older mines all across Idaho, such as the Blackbird Mine near Salmon and
the Grouse Creek Mine near Sunbeam, operate treatment systems for water

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coming out of the mines contaminated with acids, heavy metals, arsenic and other pollutants that threaten fish, wildlife and even human health.

Jack Lyman, executive director of the Idaho Mining Association, said his companies can't support an outright ban. But he left open support for Andreason's second bill.

"We'll take a look at the financial assurance bill to see if it's workable,"

Lyman said.

Long-term water-quality problems from past mining are not new, said John Robison, a mining specialist with the Idaho Conservation League. European countries still have waters contaminated from mines built by the Roman Empire.

"No one has been able to adequately clean up perpetually contaminated water," Robison said. "It's easier to keep water clean than to clean it up afterwards."

Lyman said the bills could affect businesses beyond mining. Some water treatment systems designed to permanently clean up contaminated water, including man-made wetlands, might be made illegal under the legislation, he said.

The federal government already requires similar financial protection for mines on its lands, Lyman said.

But many owners of mines who said they would not need long-term water treatment, including Grouse Creek, turned out to be wrong, Robison said.

A study of 183 mines in 14 states showed that in all of them company officials predicted they would comply with water quality regulations, but 76 percent violated water quality standards. The study was conducted by Kuipers and Associates of Butte, Mont. and Buka Environment of Boulder, Colo., for the environmental group Earthworks. The study undercut claims by mining companies that their new mines are clean.

In July 2006, Idaho Department of Environmental Quality officials criticized Atlanta Gold Corp. for substandard construction of lined ponds to treat arsenic leaking from the old mine. The Forest Service halted filling the second of the two settling ponds. The Forest Service holds only \$11,000 in bonds from Atlanta Gold to cover the costs of perpetual treatment of the water.

Atlanta Gold hopes open a mine on a tributary of the Boise River 60 miles upstream from Boise. Opponents warn that its operations could pollute the Boise River, a source of drinking water, irrigation and recreation.

The company's environmental review is on hold as it attempts to raise more money. To offer comments, contact reporter Rocky Barker at rbarker@idahostatesman.com or 377-6484.